BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

No. 3 Paisey's Oblong Decimo

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In his 'Decimo: reflections on some rare formats', a contribution to the Dennis Rhodes festschrift,[1] David Paisey has drawn attention to the practice (admittedly rare) of printing books in 'unusual' formats – i.e. in formats outside the usual lines of descent: 2° 4° 8° 16° . . .; 12° 24°; 18°. His major case study is the oblong 10°, a format used to print four Venetian editions, each the work of a different printer and spanning the period 1627-1677, of Noel de Berlaimont's *Colloquia*, a series of model conversations for the use of travellers in foreign parts arranged in eight languages, four to a page in parallel columns, an arrangement for which, as Paisey notes, an oblong format was well suited. That said, an oblong orientation does not of itself dictate imposition in any particular format, and among the numerous editions of Berlaimont are oblong octavos, duodecimos and sixteenmos. Why then these four editions in oblong decimo? As Paisey has pointed out, imposition schemes for 10° – in which an oblong orientation appears to be the norm – do occur in a number of German printers' manuals in the first half of the eighteenth century (1714-1743), though they are not to be found there later or in manuals in other languages. (There are no extant published Italian manuals earlier than the nineteenth century, though one might suppose, on analogy with the evidence of other countries and in the knowledge that some of the editions which have survived are to be found now in very small numbers, that such manuals existed.)

In concluding his discussion of the four decimo editions of Berlaimont's *Colloquia* Paisey refers to decimo as 'a format used for a good practical purpose' – presumably, in its oblong orientation, as a convenient way of accommodating parallel texts. But there still remains the question: Why decimo? There may in fact be a simple explanation for the employment of the decimo format, an explanation which goes beyond the demands of a parallel text or mere emulation. Apart from the oblong orientation demanded by the text, also to be considered are the horizontal limits for convenient handling. The double-page opening in both the editions illustrated by Paisey measures 320mm. across, suggesting that the most suitable sheet for printing the text was considered by the four printers to be one with a shorter side measuring, before cutting, slightly more than 320mm. – i.e. probably crown (about 455⁺ x 350⁺mm),[2] which,

1. David Paisey, 'Decimo: reflections on some rare formats' in Denis V. Reidy (ed.), *The Italian Book 1465-1800: studies presented to Dennis E. Rhodes on his 70th birthday* (London: British Library, 1993), pp.161-74.
2. Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p.74, drawing on R.W. Chapman, 'An Inventory of Paper', *The Library*, 4th ser., 7 (1926-7), 402-8, reports crown paper of 1674 with a longer side ranging from 455 to 485mm. and a shorter side ranging from 350 to 370mm. (In the manuscript list reproduced by Chapman the range is given as from 13¼

when divided parallel to the shorter side into five pairs, would give a cut height to the leaf of about 90mm. (as in both the editions illustrated). One might then suggest that a book with a leaf size of 90 x 160mm. would be ideally suited to the pocket, and the *Colloquia* is a pocket book *par excellence*. In other words it might be postulated that the decision to impose this particular work in oblong decimo was determined by a combination of the demand for ease of handling (and in particular carrying in the pocket) and the use of a standard size of paper (crown decimo in an oblong orientation satisfying that demand).

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to 14½ inches and from 9 to 9½ inches, but these dimensions – like all those in the list – are those of a leaf in folio; i.e. the measurement for the shorter side needs doubling to produce that for the longer side of the whole sheet.)